# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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- **Editorial**
  - Restoring Wetlands
  - Ornithological Fraud
- **Articles**
  - Survey of Heronry at Atul Chemical Industrial Complex, by Dr Piyush Patel, Navin Patel and Mohammed Jat
  - Summer Visitors to Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, by Aseem Tripathi
  - Tickell's Thrush and European Roller at Mysore, by Thejaswi S, Shivaprakash A and Mohan Kumar
  - Welcoming the Siberian Cranes, by K S Gopi Sunder
  - Bird Associations, by S Ashok Kumar IAS (Retd)
  - The White-bellied Sea Eagle in Madras, by V Santharam
  - Cattle Egrets, Dusky Crag Martins and Brown-cheeked Fulvetta, by Kiran Vasant Purandare
  - Asian Water Fowl Count near Haveri, by Dr J C Uttangi
  - White Throated Ground Thrush in Mangalore, by Dr Arunachalam Kumar
  - Romania Tries to Restore Giant Danube Delta, by Marlize Simons
- **Correspondence**
  - Grey Pelicans near Coimbatore, by S Ashok Kumar
  - Cranes and Dogs, by Borad C.K. and Aeshita Mukherjee
  - Birds of Carambolim Lake, by Heinz Lainer
  - Vultures of Nagarhole National Park, by Sarath, C.R.
  - Most Species of Vultures of Kachchh in One Place, by Shantilal N. Varu
- **Abstract**
  - House Crow Regurgitating Food for its Young, by Arunayan Sharma
- **Reviews**
  - Rejoinder to review by Lavkumar Khacher - On Birds of The Indian Subcontinent, by Grimmett *et al*, by K.S. Gopi Sundar
  - Birds of Rishi Valley and Renewal of Their Habitats, by S. Rangaswami and S. Sridhar reviewed by Mahesh Rangarajan


Vulture Flash

# Editorial

## Restoring Wetlands

One of our functions as birdwatchers is to play a constructive role in the restoration of degraded land. There have been innumerable seminars on this subject, and yet there has been no dramatic change in the landscape for the better in the last decade. Another National Symposium on Conservation, Management & Sustainable Development of Freshwater Resources of India, is to take place at T.N.B. College at Bhagalpur University, Bihar - 812007, between 24th-26th March. Some of you may like to send in your suggestions to their Organising Secretary, Dr. Sunil K. Choudhary.

During a recent discussion with some friends, including S. Rangaswami and Aasheesh Pittie, about the possibility of motivating the administration to save our wetlands, it was decided to write to the former Minister of Environment, Shri Suresh Prabhu (now in charge of Fertilizers & Chemicals). The main point of the letter was that only those wetlands can be saved which are as yet free from human settlements around them, and where there is still a reasonable amount of open land to undertake conservation measures. Several of our readers, I presume, are acquainted with such wetlands, and a detailed note about them (preferably with a photo) might result in action taken to save and restore them. Birdwatchers because of their deep interest in this subject are well placed to participate in this project.

If Governments, Central or State, and the newly empowered Panchayats do not respond, we can still get into action, and some guidelines about what to do are available in the Journal of Ecological Society, Vol.12, 1999 (Editor, Prakash Gole). Here is the case of an abandoned Stone Quarry "A 15 acre pit, 3 to 6 m. deep, full of weeds (*Typha angustata*) growing densely on stagnant water and mud, mosquito menace serious, municipal and industrial wastes flowing into the pit freely."

Properties of land : Loose, slushy mud, highly eutrophic, water weeds present. Rock and thin soil exposed in some places of uneven bed.

Action : De-weeding and de-silting of extensive nature. Weeds embedded for composting. Water aeration and oxygenation with a series of fountains. Sewage diverted to town sewerage system. Alternative refuse dumping organized. Cooperation of inhabitants in the neighbouring hutments ensured through appeals by the local corporator and municipal staff. Landscaping done for separating lake (about 6 acres) from exposed ground. Plantation of ornamental plants and forest trees on ground. Nalla construction (stone and earth, not concrete) and its plantation with aquatic and amphibious plants to function as root zone filters. Nalla designed for carrying waste water from hutments.

End use decided : Amenity for society - forest, garden, jogging track, gymnasium, playground, study area, amphitheatre – all open-air amenities on ground. Lake for game fishing, boating.

The story, which was very simple, revolved around a pair of Sibes of the Central Population. It followed their perilous journey from a wetland in central Russia through several Middle East countries, and finally into KGNP. However, the birds had begun the journey with their new chick, which was tragically poached enroute. The poachers were, however, caught and tried for their crime. Also, they were made to relate the various ways they traditionally use to capture migrating birds. The whole show, punctuated with songs, an occasional dance and colourful cranes was thoroughly enjoyed by the children who, I daresay, also took back several bits of information about cranes in general and the Sibes in particular.

The festival ended with a talk by George about the affairs of cranes in the world and what the ICF plans to do to bring back the Sibes. This year, George told the audience, the onset of winter was early at Russia and very few Sibes bred. The Central Population pair did not breed. As an attempt to bring back the population to its previous numbers, the ICF, in collaboration with Russian scientists are planning a major project. They hope to hand-rear chicks from captive breeding pairs and hope to train them to fly behind a lightweight aircraft. And they hope to lead the chicks into KGNP. The plans have been laid and details are being dealt with. This elaborate attempt, George hopes, will bring back the Central Population.

After the festival, we went to see the pair of Sibes for the last time this year. As I watched the pair, a family of resident sarus cranes chased them and the pair took off gracefully and landed a little distance away, purring their characteristic Sibe song. The odds of this pair coming back continuously in the future are heavily against the birds. Poaching enroute, wetland conversion and pollution and a host of problems surround the birds. One thing was clear: it would be worth every bit of trouble and expense taken to bring the species back to India every year. The Crane Festival had succeeded in instilling a feeling of pride in the younger generation. The work for the older generation had just begun.

# Bird Associations

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Whether bird-mammal relationship is as ancient as that between insects and flowers is a debateble question. Nonetheless this relationship is one important aspect of bird association which assumes several forms. M.D. Lister (1944) while detailing the species incidence in varied habitats of Jessore, Dhubalia of Bangladesh, parts of Burma and North India has also touched upon a few bird associations he had observed.

Desiree Proud (1951), Kannan (1963-66) and Ali & Ripley (1968-74) have noticed associations between flower birds and bird flowers. Kannan found 37 species, both specialised and non specialised nectar feeder birds visit 50 species of flowering trees in the Bombay area. But the most commonly known relationship is that between domestic animals such as oxen, cows, goats, water-buffaloes, sheep etc and birds like cattle egrets, mynas, magpie robins, wagtails, crows, sparrows, black drongos and swallows.

Robert Grubb (1970-72), Bharucha (1986), Balasubramanian (1988), Ganesh (1991) and D. Ewbank (1993) have recorded association between birds and wild animals such as Gir lions, jackals, Indian rhinos, Asiatic wild buffaloes, Indian elephants, sambar, blackbuck, lion-tailed macaques. In 1996 I have watched common mynas on the Kabini lake bed following the elephants, whose movements provided "beating effect" to flush their prey. Similar association I found between cattle egrets and sambar deer in grass patches in Ranthambore. In Kanha common mynas were seen in association with sambar deer. (1997). I have observed black drongos in association with blackbuck in Velavadar. (1999).

Charles Mc Cann (1953) had noticed congregations of birds at the marriage flights of ants and termites and during the migration of the diurnal ants. (*Dorylus* sp.) Srikumar Chattopadhya (1954) has recorded nest building activity by whitebacked munias near the nest of tree ants. Humayun Abdul Ali (1960) has observed the rufous woodpecker laying its eggs within the nest of red ants. (*Crematogaster*). He has also seen different species of sunbirds build their nests very close to the green leaf-nests of the large red ants. (*Oecophylla smaragdina*). Benjamin Underwood (1987-89) has watched the orange-rumped honeyguide closely following the Himalayan honey bee.

A well known type of association is between different species of birds. Salim Ali (1948) noticed a racket-tailed drongo shadowing a pair of treepies. R.S.P. Bates (1952) pursued a racket-tailed drongo following a large, yellow-naped woodpecker. S. Abraham (1972) reported a painted stork-pelican association. A.J.T. Johnson and two others (1979-80) observed a mutually beneficial association between a black drongo and white-headed babblers aerially hawking insects. Lalitha Vijayan (1980-81) found a significant connection between 25 species of birds with the Malabar woodshrike. Asad A. Rahmani, has recorded the association of black drongo, white-eyed buzzard eagle, redheaded merlin and Indian roller with the great Indian bustard, (1981-85). He has also recorded little grebes following male shovellers, pintails and wigeons, (1992). Bharucha (1987) witnessed common mynas as camp followers of lesser leal.

However the most interesting aspect of birds is their ability to take advantage of forest fires and other natural phenomenon. In the Nepal Terai, Charles Mc Cann (1932) saw drongos, swallows and shrikes feeding on the escaping partly roasted insects and small animals. W.W.A. Phillips (1953) recorded Ceylon swallows associated with grass fire in Sri Lanka. In Chitwan, Adrian Del-Nevo and Peter Ewins (1981) watched black and ashy drongos, ashy wood swallows and black-shouldered kites busy feasting at fires. In a Nagarhole forest fire I witnessed Indian rollers, black drongos and shrikes positioning themselves in advance of the forest fire and foraging insects disturbed by the flames. (1990).

Though one cannot hazard a generalization based on a limited data base, yet one is inclined to think that species belonging to Corvidae, Sturnidae and Picidae have a propensity for such associations. But then, there remain many questions to be answered.

1. Are they more adaptive to such associations than others?
2. Is such relationship casual or merely opportunistic for food acquisition, or
3. Is it governed by instinct or learnt by each individual by imitating other birds or its parents?
4. Why not other birds find such association more beneficial?

# The Whitebellied Sea Eagle in Madras

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Mr. S.V. Nilakanta's note in the 40th Anniversary issue of the *Newsletter* on the white-bellied sea eagle in Adyar in the 1930's and its nest in the campus of the Theosophical Society made me look through my own diaries and notes on the species in Madras.

In 1978 (when I began birdwatching at Madras and keeping regular notes), I used to encounter the white-bellied sea eagle in the neighborhood of Adyar Estuary quite regularly. Since my house is just about a kilometer from the estuary, I have even seen the bird in overhead flight, above my house. Essentially a solitary bird, it was a magnificent sight seeing the bird soaring and hunting for its prey over the sea or the river mouth. Invariably the bird would be mobbed by dozens of crows and occasionally by a kite or two. On one occasion, I noticed a bird diving and making off with a dead fish 3-5 inches long, washed on to the banks of the river.

Although I was not fortunate enough to see its nest, I was sure it was nesting in the Theosophical Society estates. The late Mr. Siddharath C. Buch, a keen birdwatcher had once told me about seeing its nest in the campus. I had seen birds in immature/juvenile plumage at the Theosophical Society on 14th June 1979 and 19th August 1980. I had also, on several instances (since 1981), noticed the sea eagle at the Guindy National Park, some 3-4 kms from the estuary and I suspected it to be nesting in the wooded area here. My suspicions were confirmed on 11th December 1983 when I found a bird carrying some nesting material. But I could never see the nest. In fact, shortly after this, the bird mysteriously disappeared from the city. I had the last 'darshan' of the bird on 21st January 1984 at the estuary after which there was no trace of the bird.

I gave up all hopes of the sea eagle turning up in the city. The seacoast and water-bodies were all getting increasingly polluted and the coastal area was under tremendous pressure from housing colonies, industrial estates etc. though the Guindy park and Theosophical Society estates were relatively less disturbed.

After a full five years, I got a report of the bird being sighted at Adyar Estuary in early 1989. By this time, I was based at Pondicherry, though a fairly frequent visitor to the city. On 9th March 1989, I sighted an immature bird at the Guindy Park. I again saw an adult bird at Perumbakkam on 31st March (some 15-20 kms south of Adyar) and on 5th April an adult bird was back at the estuary, scattering flocks of waders feeding on the tidal mudflats as it flew majestically over them. I was thrilled to see the sea eagle back at the estuary and hoped it would stay on. A juvenile sea eagle was seen on 25th January 1990 at the Theosophical Society. I had two sightings thereafter of an adult bird at Guindy on 27th January and 18th March 1990. By then, I myself became an occasional visitor to Madras and my career took me out of the city. I have never again seen a sea eagle in the city for the last almost 10 years and haven't heard of sightings from other friends.

I know the bird is around at Pulicat lake and also elsewhere along the Coromandel coast where conditions are more favourable. I am sure that if we provide it with similar conditions, it could return to soar over the city once again. The osprey and the peregrine falcon, once persecuted and considered endangered in the UK and USA have been successfully rehabilitated thanks to strict conservation measures. Do we have the will to bring back the white-bellied sea eagle to our own coastal towns and villages where it was once so common?